

UNCLAS QUEBEC 000033

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SUBJECT: QUEBEC RELEASES FLU PANDEMIC EMERGENCY PLAN

¶1. Summary: Provincial Health Minister Philippe Couillard unveiled Quebec's Avian Flu strategy at a press conference, March 9. Quebec's plan addresses the protection of public health; medical care; psycho-social welfare; communication and information; and the functioning of the health system in a pandemic situation. It also provides a framework for regional and municipal authorities to submit specific local plans. The Health Minister assured Quebecers that the province is not in a pandemic situation but that emergency planning is part of responsible government. The high visibility roll-out is only in part an indication of GOQ concern over Avian Flu -- it also reflects Premier Charest's strategy of raising the profile of his government's "success" stories in advance of an election which could come early next year. End summary.

¶2. Popular Health Minister Philippe Couillard, a physician himself, rolled-out Quebec's Avian Flu strategy at a special press conference March 9, broadcast live on Quebec's all-news television network. In what he called a "critical but plausible" Avian Flu pandemic scenario, Couillard estimated that up to 35 percent of Quebec's 7.7 million inhabitants could potentially fall sick in successive waves over an eight to fifteen week period. Of these, 1.4 million might require professional help, and 34,000 would need hospitalization. The death toll might reach as high as 8,500. 75-80% of Quebecers would need to be immunized, requiring 11-14 million doses of vaccine. A vaccine could not be developed until the human version of the flu starts claiming victims, and a minimum of 3-4 months would be required to develop the vaccine, with at least another month to administer it.

¶3. To help manage the situation, Quebec officials have already been drawing up lists of thousands of retired or inactive staff and volunteers from the general population who could be drafted to help out in the event of a pandemic. The Quebec provincial plan foresees the recruitment of up to 80,000 people to help maintain services. Couillard cited the SARS episode in pointing out the need to prevent health care centers from being themselves immobilized from infection, and said alternative care centers would be employed. Couillard estimated that an Avian Flu pandemic could cost the health system approximately CDN \$250 million. The economic impact, he acknowledged, would be even greater.

¶4. Couillard emphasized the critical role of the media in a pandemic situation in passing on accurate and reliable information while steering clear of alarmist scenarios. He cautioned against the propagation of self-proclaimed experts giving out erroneous information and he urged the media to consult health officials directly for accurate data. Quebec will also rely on locally elected officials to clearly communicate information to the public in their respective regional districts. Couillard's warning echoed that of the Premier who, in a media interview a few days before, highlighted his preoccupation with the role of the media if and when confronted with an outbreak. "It is easy to become sensationalist about it. My wish is that the media act in a rigorous way."

¶5. The GOQ roll out and full media coverage are raising public awareness of the risk of Avian Flu. Le Soleil editorialized that GOQ planning should reassure citizens. Montreal's La Presse also commented positively, devoting two full pages to the GOQ plan with the title and subtitle: "Government prepares itself for the worst. An initiative welcomed by people working in the health sector." Other Quebec papers also led with the Quebec plan and examined the potential shortfalls in antiviral pills and protective masks, predictions of infection statistics, and the cascading negative economic impact.

¶6. Comment: The GOQ is taking the Avian Flu risk seriously. In our discussions of Avian Flu with Quebec officials, we have been given every indication that the needs of Quebecers and of Americans in Quebec will be responsibly addressed. Dr. Arthur Porter, Director General and Chief Executive Officer at McGill University Health Center, told Montreal's CG that his team is ready to treat "any potential cases of avian flu," adding that symptomatic patients usually stay where they are to be treated locally.

Couillard delivered a confident public message that Quebec's health and civil security networks are systematically preparing for a possible pandemic outbreak.

¶7. Comment (con't.): Politically, Quebec Premier Charest chose a highly visible roll-out of his government's Avian Flu strategy only in part because of the importance of the subject matter. Charest also is in an election mode, and he has planned a series

of such policy rollouts in the months to come. On March 14, he will give a major policy speech at the National Assembly, seen here as another opportunity for him to set the tone in advance of an election.

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